

8-2013

The Real Housewives of the Garden of Eden

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THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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August 2013

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on a critical analysis of the reality television program *The Real Housewives*, using the biblical story of Eve to illuminate the ways in which myths of femininity are perpetuated and reimagined within popular culture. Bridging reality television scholarship with post biblical scholarship surrounding the figure of Eve, this essay seeks to approach how both mythology and spectacle intertwine within the mass consumed genre of reality television to reiterate and recreate notions of the eternal feminine in ways that disarm and disengage audiences' critical thinking and response to these representations. By focusing on conspicuous consumption and bodily alteration and adornment within *The Real Housewives*, this essay provides insight into how this show presents femininity as a continuous cycle of reaching for perfection and perpetually falling short due to the myth of inherently flawed femininity, which begins with Eve's story and can be carried forward to her modern counterpart, the real housewife.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE FATEFUL REACH

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.
Genesis 3:20

I was a child-star, but now my most important role is being a mother.
Kim Richards, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*

In the beginning, there was Eve. Eve was made from Adam. She had a brief conversation with a snake one day, took a bite of a tempting fruit recommended by the snake, and kindly offered the delicious fruit to her mate. Somewhere during this brief passage in Genesis, women became responsible for all of humankind's problems and struggles, not to mention its proverbial fall from grace—eviction from the coveted, gated community. While close readings of these biblical passages may offer some room for a more reasonable interpretation of this creation story, it is the subsidiary cultural shockwave rather than the original text that leaves the influence of this story still reverberating within popular understandings of domestic gender roles. The biblical story, which will be contextualized in this discussion as Judeo-Christian creation myth, has provided explanation for women's place as second to man and as inherently and perpetually flawed.

Although myth might often be perceived as a form belonging to antiquity, modern cultures seem no less eager to understand themselves and others through stories that will offer tidy and totalizing rationalizations for the complexities of life's questions. However, in present culture, the media spectacle has subsumed ancient myth and stands in the place of traditional texts as the source for understanding and assurance of societal norms. This

is problematic in that popular television rarely represents stories of the mundane truth but rather succeeds in its exploitation of the spectacular and the dramatic. Fortunately, most people can understand that television is not reality. Unless of course, it is labeled as “reality television.” Reality television is a genre that complicates viewers’ interaction with the media spectacle. While the premise of fiction should keep most viewers at a critical distance from what they are watching, the premise of reality as the basis for the spectacle suggests that while viewers can suspend their analytical participation in viewing the programming, they must still acknowledge that elements of the story are true and therefore must purport something true in their portrayal. By focusing on real people and by implementing a documentary-style format, reality television is posited as presenting examples of culture that are intended to be understood as true. Susan J. Douglass addresses this genre in her work, *Enlightened Sexism*, exploring how “the news/documentary visual style is meant to stoke our confidence that the representations of many of the women are true, natural, genuine,” while ignoring the fact that the editing of these shows leaves hours of footage on the cutting room floor (190). The shows are edited to appear as though they capture exactly what happens in the characters’ lives, yet the shows are inevitably edited and re-cut to represent the producers’ intended message. In her book *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*, media critic and journalist Jennifer Pozner addresses the ways in which this type of programming exploits and reinforces popular notions of femininity through its unique format. Pozner explains that while “many of us are aware that reality shows play fast and loose with context and editing ...[and while we know] they’re at least somewhat ‘fake,’

that knowledge doesn't stop us from passing judgment about the behavior and personalities of people who appear on reality TV" (23). While the myth of Eve once served as the definitive reference for representations of the eternal feminine, the same story can now be found within modern, spectacular representations of the same figure.

One may question how the ancient story of Eve can still pervade current understandings of gender. From Douglas's perspective, women represented on television as pop-culture icons are still formed on classic stereotypes, yet there is an irony surrounding these characters and their representations that actually works to prevent viewers from drawing critical conclusions, thereby allowing them to dismiss the presence of these stereotypes or to view them as a necessary component within traditional narratives. The danger of "ironic sexism" (Douglas 191) lies in its ability to disseminate and perpetuate myths about gender norms while functioning under the assumption of relatively little responsibility for those claims. In her chapter "Reality Bites," Douglas explores how reality television, in particular, is able to successfully implement these myths as selling points for the shows and, in some cases, as the main plot point. When shows about or featuring women are presented as reality, the portrayals of these women can easily be accepted by viewers as truthful portrayals and accurate depictions, whereas a fictional show can more easily be marked by its intentional scripting of stereotypes. So while reality television does operate under a guise of truthful representation, as Douglas points out, these shows do not "only resurrect various sexist stereotypes, [they] also resurrect approval of them" (211). When shows are accepted as reality, viewers can more assuredly use these shows to draw conclusions about women's essential nature. To delve

further into how this genre creates a cultural impact, I will consult Mark Andrejevic's work, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Andrejevic highlights how this genre not only generates cultural understanding of gender and class but also serves as a platform for lifestyle commerce, providing a focus on the ways in which these shows "offer to revitalize fictional formats by injecting them with elements of the real" (70). The irony surrounding this genre allows reality television to protect "artifice by exposing it" while also reflecting "the emerging reality of the interactive economy" (Andrejevic 16). By creating spectacular versions of the real and by capitalizing on the opportunities for marketing created by this spectacle, reality television prompts troubling responses from viewers not only in how they perceive the culture portrayed but also how they participate in consumerist behavior as a result of these portrayals. Thus, women are exposed to reifications of classic stereotypes as well as the ways in which they may seek to grasp at these representations through consumption in attempts to emulate what they find desirable within the spectacle. So while reality television may reside within the realm of spectacle, despite the realistic aspects of some of its material, the emulation of these shows creates a reality that is based, problematically, on spectacular representation. While Andrejevic points out that there is a vast range of material that can be classified as reality television, I will focus on a program that is particularly pertinent to how women see themselves and their options as consumers within the current social landscape.

The Real Housewives (TRH) franchise on the Bravo network offers viewers a look behind the gates of coveted communities to examples of the lives of the wealthy families who dwell inside. When the original *Real Housewives* program aired in 2006,

TRH of Orange County, it began with a gate opening and an epigraph stating that “7 million families live in gated communities,” providing no further explanation for what this means but suggesting that this show will allow a glimpse behind these gates. As the title suggests and the opening credits confirm, the focus is on the women in these families, who are presented as “real” and as “housewives,” two monikers that will be analyzed here. The term “housewife” has evolved from its historical connotations of a meek woman spending her days in the kitchen and at the clothesline. The new housewife, according to Bravo, is a model of perfection not in her ability to submit to the service of others but in her ability to display the wealth that allows her to be excused from these traditional familial duties. As Pozner points out, “the *Real Housewives* are meant to illustrate [that] women with money ... care more about implants, mansions, galas, and feuds than kids, husbands, families, and communities” (118). The particular ways in which wealth is most conspicuously displayed in each of the shows in this franchise include, of course, lavish homes, cars, and vacations, but what is constantly visible and possibly most impressive from viewing the shows is how the women use wealth to alter and attempt improvement of their bodies. In this way, women are still being portrayed as Eves who are bound to the maternal body and who must use that body to represent their femininity and their allegiance to it. TRH suggests, like Eve’s story, that reaching beyond the confines of the maternal body is both punishable yet essential to fulfilling women’s obligation to the eternal feminine. Eve was punished by being relegated to her maternal body, but the women on TRH showcase the need for women to continue this relegation of themselves and other women in order to maintain the status quo established by Eve’s

punishment. To that end, the show focuses heavily on the expensive clothing, outrageous jewelry, and the most extreme display, the bodily alteration that seems to be taken for granted as part of this lifestyle. The real housewives constitute the same cultural figure as Eve in that they are used to exemplify how women must be bound to the maternal body and how they must work to perfect that body in attempts to buy back the original perfection stained by Eve's reach.

The postbiblical scholarship that has followed Eve's original story in Genesis came to define current cultural understanding of her, and TRH makes its own contribution to these myths surrounding ideas of essential femininity. Much as Eve has come to stand for the essential nature of all women, women on reality television also serve as the ultimate representations of feminine roles within American culture. It is not that Eve is no longer a force of her own within current understandings of gender, because she is still very much a presence, but as the media spectacle subsumes the role of more traditional forms of myth, its representations start to incorporate those traditional understandings and spin them to viewers in new ways. TRH franchise presents a fresh version of the Eve myth in that it depends on the assumption that the average female viewer, like Eve, is reaching for something that is either unattainable or deceptive in its destructive consequences, something beyond the restriction of the maternal body. However, the show also serves to confirm, like Eve's story, that in reaching for the mythical perfection offered, women will inevitably fall short and will need to recognize their original place as social subordinates, retreating to the eternal feminine as their only true option. Pozner writes, "the reality TV landscape paints [women] as failures in the

domestic domain that we're supposed to believe is our sole responsibility," (119), so women can glean from these shows that while they may be inherently flawed, there are solutions available for purchase. The show offers women this tempting fruit, suggesting a sort of knowledge that can be gained through consumption as well as allegiance to their preordained role as housewife. Thus, female viewers may eventually come to simulate what they see on the show in attempts to avoid becoming an Eve, perhaps not realizing that this is exactly the trap that this show sets. Guy Debord explores the idea of this "false choice" in his work *The Society of the Spectacle*, pointing out how "competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles" juxtaposed with "roles—for the most part signified and embodied in objects" creates a cycle of reaching for ideals that cannot be met along with an endless need to continue this reach, despite its futility.

To further illuminate the basis of the stereotypes that are pertinent to this discussion of female gender roles, I will refer to Simone De Beauvoir, who offers the terminology of the "eternal feminine" in her comprehensive work on women's cultural roles, *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir compares the classification of women as a gender to ways that certain ethnicities have become stereotyped, such as "the black soul" or "the Jewish character," (12) and suggests that while these stereotypes can be overcome or denied, these groups of people are still framed in ways that restrict and dictate how they are to be viewed by themselves and by societies at large. The notion of the eternal feminine suggests that there is an essentialized entity of a "true woman" and that challenges to this notion can result in women who become displaced from the popularly accepted essential nature of their gender. The eternal feminine, for De Beauvoir,

represents women's aspirations to present themselves as "frivolous, infantile, irresponsible, the woman subjugated to man" (12). This standard of femininity, which can be traced back to Eve and forward to shows such as *The Real Housewives*, negates attempts at individual recognition of one's place within society and instead suggests that *all* women must adhere to a universal set of characteristics to be recognized as women; they must all continue to seek an ideal that is not concrete but, rather, spectacular. Furthermore, as De Beauvoir iterates, women are bound by the notion of the eternal feminine to nature as reproductive bodies, separating them from the realm of intellectual and spiritual existence that was presumably sacrificed by Eve in her attempts to reach for knowledge that ultimately led to her complete and radical embodiment in pain and suffering. Like Eve, who was punished for this reach, so are the real housewives presented for scrutiny as continued representations of inherent female flaws and as a modern interpretation of the eternal feminine.

Eve's reach for knowledge resulted in punishment specific to her bodily duties: "with painful labor you will give birth to children ... your husband will rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). In the narratives formed around TRH, the idea of bodily relegation diverges from the purpose of motherhood and childbearing and instead reveals the ways in which the modern housewife uses consumption to punish her body or at least to suggest its inherent imperfection and need for perpetual improvement. Lee and Moscovitz note how in these shows, "money destroys, rather than enables, self-awareness, friendship, ... and competent mothering," (65). Rather than money allowing these women power and access to a gender-neutral realm, it instead becomes the snake

that suggests women keep reaching for an ideal that results only in further scrutiny. *The Real Housewives* franchise is the front-runner among reality television programming in providing new myths of the eternal feminine. By displaying a version of American culture in which women must be recognized as housewives, despite other personal or professional achievements, and in which their worth is tied directly to their role as reproductive or ornamental bodies, this show continues to peddle these notions of femininity in varied and problematic ways.

CHAPTER TWO

DELIVER US FROM EVE

And do you not know that you are [each] an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of the forbidden tree . . .

Tertullian: 3rd Century CE

From the earliest biblical scholarship, Eve's story, which receives little space or recurring consideration in the Bible itself, becomes an important point of conversation in that it fulfills the necessity of explaining the question of woman's otherness to man.

Opposition is, of course, an inevitable social reality, so it is not necessarily the opposition itself that is problematic, but rather how the stories, myths, and histories surrounding the opposition come to power in popular thought and how those thoughts become manifest in popular actions and habits regarding gender. Ascribing such qualities to all women, as early biblical scholar Tertullian does, allows a power to men, in this case supposedly supported by biblical law, to put certain parameters on femininity and the duties and burdens of women, parameters which become indisputable. Those who sought justification for patriarchy "found ammunition in the legends of Eve and Pandora" (De Beauvoir 11), and it is apparent by these myths' reigning stronghold on popular culture that they are still very much present in modern understandings of gender. In Tertullian's writings in *On the Apparel of Women*, he addresses their adornment, suggesting, it seems, that regardless of bodily ornaments or enhancements, women remain unable to shed the

transgressions of the first woman. He references pearls, onyx, and gold, and writes, “Eve, expelled from paradise, (Eve) already dead, would also have coveted these things, I imagine! No more, then, ought she now to crave, or be acquainted with (if she desires to live again), what, when she was living, she had neither had nor known” (quoted from *Early Christian Writings*). Tertullian’s theories of women culminate in the notion that regardless of attempts at improvement or salvation, the sex will be forever imprisoned within their sinful bodies, which no amount of jewels can liberate or cleanse. While this conspicuous display of wealth or material objects is deemed necessary, it does not serve to redeem or improve women’s social status or to elevate them beyond their abject maternal bodies.

Historically, readings of Eve have ended in the same conclusion: women are inherently naive, untrustworthy, and in need of male guidance to avoid causing harm to all of humanity. This has proved a convenient reading to those who would seek to justify societies in which women exist as an underclass, preordained to serve men as only and exclusively mothers and wives. Early biblical scholars such as Tertullian notoriously took contextually vague passages from scripture to augment and then re-use as a bolster for popular myths about gender, among other issues that were seen as requiring political control. In Genesis, what could have originally been considered a commonplace, conflict-based creation story, suggesting the necessity of action and consequence, instead becomes justification and fact for patriarchal social ordinances that rely exclusively on male interpretations of gender as represented in scripture. Regardless of the vague nature of the Genesis story itself, the subsequent texts that were distributed and made available,

that were made popular, were the ones that created impression and influence. In *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Carol Meyers acknowledges the ways in which original contexts are important to an interpretation of a text but also how popular representations or recreations come to stand in for and replace original sentiments with more pointed ones. She notes how “interpretive concept[s] became so familiar that [their] absence from the Genesis story itself goes unnoticed” (Meyers 63).

One of the most popular interpretations of Eve’s story comes in the form of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which has come to offer an in-depth and widely referenced interpretation of the original Genesis text. This poem’s popularity and resounding presence within the study of literature contributes to understandings of the story of Eve and serves to highlight her otherness to man. Although, as Lee Morrissey points out, this text offers plenty of opportunities to view Eve’s actions as an exercise in subjectivity rather than an indication of her subordination. But, in response, one can look to Deborah Rooke’s feminist theological insight, which addresses, again, how outcome trumps intention: “The point seems to be that regardless of whether the snake and the woman were right, their ideas about how reality could be were different from how God wanted it to be. They are scapegoated and ‘otherized’ in order to protect the line of communication between God and Man, since this is the channel via which God’s patriarchal norm is maintained” (171). So, as women have struggled to gain equality on a social level, popular myths of femininity have served as unvanquished proof that regardless of societal progress, women

are destined by God and by His followers to be second rate and inferior. Purporting the Bible as indisputable truth, or as reality, only serves to strengthen these assumptions and render them indisputable. There are some, however, who would read Eve's story as one of liberation and independence for woman. After all, she is defying the mysteriously absent patriarch figure in an attempt for greater knowledge and personal improvement; some might see this as an act of courage or daring on her part, a leap of faith, rather than a leap from it.

Unfortunately, the story remains largely regarded as a way to explain humans' earthly misery and also the reasons that women must be kept in a certain social sphere. In her comprehensive overview of the presence of this story within popular culture, Theresa Sanders grapples with many practical questions about Eve and Adam and what they may have been intended to represent along with what they have actually come to represent within cultural understandings of gender. From classic to contemporary films, television series, books, cartoons, and radio shows, the world's first couple is a go-to for gender-based humor, both unmistakable in their respective representations. Sanders includes in her review the Creation Museum in Kentucky, where those seeking to visit a "realistic" interpretation of the Garden of Eden can find it, complete with displays of dinosaurs existing alongside man and other creative explanations for how science and the truth of the Bible are indisputably one in the same. After viewing a diorama of the traditional bible story in the Garden, visitors will view a film further explaining that Jesus, the son of

God, would come to earth as the answer to Adam and Eve's transgressions (Sanders 148).

The museum tour is focused, as the name of the organization that sponsors the Creation Museum, Answers in Genesis (AiG) suggests, on the first book of the Bible as the basis for imperial knowledge, reappropriating science as well as using sensationalism to offer proof of their explanations.

To further complicate popular explanations of women's role within the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is another cultural figure that deserves attention within this discussion: "she is the inverse figure of the sinner Eve; she crushes the serpent under her foot; she is the mediator of salvation, as Eve was of damnation" (De Beauvoir 189).

When Christ, in the form of a discernibly male body, came to save all humans from their state as sinners (a state attributed to Adam and Eve), he was born of a common woman named Mary. The most important thing to note about Mary, aside from her celebrity-mom status, is that she was a virgin and has been the only woman in history to escape unscathed and rather worshiped for her ability to bear a child out of wedlock, creating the most impossible of unattainable standards for women: the virgin mother. Thus, women were no longer inherently evil, because at least one of them was necessary to bring salvation to earth (that she had heretofore damned). However, if all women are assumed to be privy to the qualities of Eve, it could only be expected that all women also be able to adhere to the qualities of Mary as strictly as possible, especially in hopes of keeping the dark alternative from taking precedence. Virginal wife/mother becomes woman's

alternative to the previously offered biblical extreme of the eternal feminine embodied by Eve. "If woman wishes to overcome the original stain in herself, her only alternative is to bow before God, whose will subordinates her to man. And by this submission she can assume a new role in masculine mythology" (De Beauvoir 189), and that role splits at this junction in the text (the immaculate conception and birth of Christ) from woman as the sole reproductive counterpart for man to his ultimate nurturer and caretaker, implying perhaps an even greater obligation for woman, if under a more socially appropriate and respected pretense. The Madonna/Whore complex, as it is referred to in popular culture, creates a new dichotomy of femininity and prompts men to view women either as disposable sexual objects or as those who are in men's service as pious, selfless mothers to their offspring. In either of these versions of the eternal feminine, women are subscribed to their role as a body meant for male use. The short passages in the Bible that include Eve after her starring role in Eden inform readers that she, in addition to being the world's first woman and original sinner, was the first mother, though she is never heralded for this role. Furthermore, she is barely recognized as a mother in her appearances throughout popular culture; she remains most memorably the temptress. Mary replaces Eve as the poster girl for popular Christian conceptions of femininity and assumes all of the positive attributes (if very few) that the Church historically aligned with being female. Eve, then, remained to bear the brunt of imperfection and carry on as the example of what happens when a woman reaches beyond the confines into which she

has been placed. Her story continues to emphasize how the actions of woman have power that is specifically destructive and damaging if not properly contained. This notion aligns with other myths of femininity as well, most notably that of Pandora and her legendary box. The conclusion that can be easily drawn time and again from these myths is that a safe and good woman is one who is kept within the realm of the home and in the service of motherhood; she must remain an object who can be kept. Mary and Eve, though in different ways, both provide explanations for the necessity of the eternal feminine, of women as reproductive bodies, tied to nature, though not in control of it.

CHAPTER THREE

FOLLOWED OUT THE GARDEN BY CAMERAS

My husband is one of the top plastic surgeons in Miami, and I am his best creation.
Lisa Hochstein, *The Real Housewives of Miami*

Within the past decade, reality television has become an inescapable cultural phenomenon. With minimal production costs, endless possibilities for material, and a wide pool of willing subjects, the genre has become a cash cow for most major networks. *The Real Housewives* franchise (TRH) on Bravo has brought notable success to the network, which was acquired by NBC Universal (now owned by Comcast and GE) in 2002 (Cox and Proffitt 297) and currently features six American cities in its programming¹, along with three international spin-offs in Australia, France, and Canada. As one might infer from the title of the show, the younger, sexier version of the soap opera serves to provide a view into the lifestyles of *real* housewives living in affluent neighborhoods throughout the U.S. While the monikers “real” and “housewife” precede the women in these shows, they seem to be representative of anything but the traditional perceptions of those respective titles.

It is no secret that these shows thrive on their representations of wealth. They function under the sub-genre of lifestyle television, intended to monitor the lives of a certain interest group (Pozner). The action in the shows revolves largely around the women’s homes, vacations, parties, and other activities of leisure. While the families of

¹ Orange County, CA; NYC; Atlanta, GA; New Jersey; Beverly Hills, CA; Miami, FL

the women are featured, some more prominently than others, in the shows' story lines, the housewives are the essential focus. It is also clearly established that these types of housewives are not tied by their apron strings to their children and stoves, but rather are presented by the show as more independent and socially mobile housewives, who are granted power through material wealth. However, the scope of the power purported by the show is deceptive for a reason that should not go without mentioning. TRH is focused on people who are presumed to be the upper class of their featured area of the country. Historically, women in higher classes in America have faced greater challenges to their gender than those who were in working class situations. In working class families, a sense of equality can be gained from sharing the familial burden. However, as Betty Friedan explores in her critique of the American housewife, in affluent families, where the male is generally in control of earning and managing the family's wealth, women are seen as having the privilege of not working and are expected to find fulfillment in their relegation to the domestic sphere. In the case of the characters featured on TRH, who can afford a staff of people to take care of their housewifely duties, they must reimagine their role not as servant but as spender. Thus, it is important to notice that the conspicuous consumption depicted in these shows, while symbolic of social mobility, is actually a representation of woman's role as passive consumer rather than active producer within the familial relationship. While the power to spend is no less of a power, it grants rewards that are a means to another end. The objects bought are not truly markers of success but

rather attempts at personal improvement. However, if one looks to Tertullian's remarks about the adornment of women's bodies, presented in the previous section, one can begin to understand the double standard that women face in attempting to improve themselves through material consumption, only to be continually reduced to the sinful female body, forever cursed by the myth of Eve's transgression. While women are encouraged to and heralded for adorning their bodies, there is also an underlying understanding that no amount of jewels can eradicate women from their bodily confinement.

The presence of reality television within American popular culture has provided a plethora of spectacle, which serves to construct a certain brand of reality and to offer a selection of roles within that reality. The strange balance that these shows, particularly TRH, strike between illusion and reality prepares viewers for an immediate suspension of expectations of either. This suspension of the ability, let alone the desire, of viewers to question their visual consumption is what makes these shows strangely influential in unexpected ways. Andrejevic quotes Theodor Adorno's assessment of this phenomenon, which Andrejevic refers to as "the promise of the 'real'": 'the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality'" and goes on to explain that these representations of the real on television, while perhaps perceived as superficial, are actually fed by social tensions. By labeling these women, who are in fact real people,

as the “real housewives” of a given area, the show seems to insinuate not only that they are the truest form of that role but also that they represent that role as it should be desired by most women. It also puts an emphasis on the terms, *house* and *wife*, making a direct connection between reality and the place where a woman belongs within that reality, thus perpetuating the social tension surrounding women’s societal roles.

The words “real” and “housewife” can be read as interesting choices for the show’s title for a variety of reasons. For one, the amount of plastic surgery represented on the show renders the term “real” ironic from the first thirty seconds of TRH of Miami, for example, in which Lisa Hochstein introduces herself as the wife of one of the best plastic surgeons in Miami, and also calls herself “his best creation.” The women become walking billboards for new procedures and for surgeons in their area, and more than a few of these women are married to them. Lisa’s husband reportedly goes by the “Boob God” in Miami, and his wife’s presence on the show serves as a perfect example of how reality television provides a platform for lifestyle commerce. While Mrs. Hochstein is a self-proclaimed, “professional housewife,” many women represented on these shows are single in addition to being shrewd businesswomen. While viewers may quickly assume that the women are on the shows in a quest for fame, the somewhat less obvious truth is that these shows are driven purely by their ability to make excellent returns on production costs, both for the

investment put out by the networks and by the participants who gain subsidiary monetary rewards from the self-promotion provided by the show. Whether it is for their husbands' plastic surgery office or for their own music records, clothing lines, or workout videos, there is never a missed opportunity for product placement. On the contrary, this aspect of the genre is what drives the success of the shows for networks and participants. Of course, seeing women in positions of power on television should reinforce positive ideas of femininity, and it is refreshing that so many of the women on the show *do* work and are creating success for themselves, even the ones who are married and have children. Contrary to the prevailing messages put forth by the programming, on many of the shows, a number of the women are shown carrying the financial burden for their respective male partners, and very few of the characters list "professional housewife" as their full-time occupation. However, the show is not called *The Real Women of Upper Class America*. It is called *The Real Housewives* (of a Place You Can't Afford to Live). Regardless of their professional achievements, these women are presented as interesting or valuable in their status as housewives. No amount of adornment or professional success outside of the home can remove women from their status, inherited from Eve, as subordinate maternal bodies, doomed to continually reach and fall and then reach again.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MYTH OF THE ETERNAL FEMININE

Perhaps the myth of woman will be phased out one day: the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them. But today it still exists in the hearts of all men.

De Beauvoir 162

In light of all the progress that women have achieved socially, on an international level and within American culture specifically, it might seem unclear how these myths still infiltrate cultural understandings of gender. To move to a closer realization of just how these myths work, whether ancient or revivals coated in shiny newness, requires an understanding of the “mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature” (Barthes 9). One of the easiest myths to glean from the current media spectacle is that women love to shop, and TRH takes this classic stereotype to the level of myth in that it suggests that shopping is not only women’s greatest pleasure but also their most important duty. All women represented on these shows appear to know how, have the desire, and are desperate to go shopping for clothes and luxuries at any given time. When a significant amount of women are indulging in programming that uses shopping as one of its main plot points, it is only logical that the viewer culture would be prompted to respond with shopping. But how is the woman as shopper a problematic role? Why is spending money a point of contingency? In the context of a culture that is shaped and represented by shows such as TRH, the issue lies in the acts of simulation that occur when lifestyle television fills the role of mythmaker. As Eve reached for knowledge beyond her own body, so do the real housewives reach for something beyond their maternal bodies, in a variety of forms, through shopping. In his interview with Bill

Moyer, Joseph Campbell states, “we’re kept out of the Garden by our own fear and desire in relation to what we think to be the goods of our life” (107), and this speaks to how women are kept, through these popular myths of femininity, from reaching a state of existence beyond the confines of the eternal feminine. The desire to embody the role most readily assigned to them paired with the fear of having to fulfill such a role creates this pattern of reaching and falling that can never result in stability. The act of spending, as represented by TRH, illustrates this pattern of desire and fear, of reaching and falling, that keeps women in a constant struggle, and “imposes an expectation that the feminine subject will vigilantly and consistently reinvent her femininity according to market trends” (Lee and Moscovitz 67). What remains cleverly concealed within the myth of Eve and the myths of femininity purported by TRH is this: women are made to feel that they must play into their role as spender in order to achieve perfection, reaching for something that they lack, but there is no perfection to achieve, as Eve discovered through her exile from paradise and as women continually discover through their failure to gain access to this mythical paradise. However, this realization does not keep women from attempting.

In his work *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard discusses television, referring to it, appropriately for the purposes of this discussion, as “the liturgical drama of a mass society.” But his context for reality television was the very first ever produced in America, in which the Loud family was filmed for seven uninterrupted months in 1971. Regardless, Baudrillard writes on the ways in which this type of programming is

simulated because the assumption that these shows are filmed “as if no one is watching” is neither true nor untrue. The suspension of critical thinking involved in viewing reality television is similar to what Baudrillard describes in that because viewers are allowed a simultaneously microscopic yet safely distanced view, because they are positioned as judge and holder of the gaze yet looking for something of themselves within the spectacle presented, there is a simulation that occurs. For example, a woman who watches TRH may buy a pair of \$700 Christian Louboutin shoes that she saw featured on the show. She may give the show credit for her purchase, or she may not, but in either scenario, the question of simulation leaves the influence of the show ambiguous, although the purchase is certainly not. Baudrillard also claims that in the case of the Louds, television is no longer spectacle at all. It moves past the realm of spectacle, he argues, into a strange blended space where reality and affectation cannot be distinguished and therefore become one in the same: “dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV” (“The End of the Panopticon”). If this is so, then the realization that these programs are intended to be read as spectacle and received as spectacular representations becomes irrelevant. Viewers are, by way of interacting with reality television, already assuming simulation as reality, and in this interaction, rendering the two indistinguishable. Furthermore, the simulation of the shows by the viewers creates a form of reality that is tangible. Intentions are subjective, but the sales reports for companies and products featured on TRH cannot be mistaken or misread. What becomes culturally pertinent and impressionable from these shows is not how they are intended to be received but the results they render. Women continue to

embody the eternal feminine as it is presented to them through TRH, despite attempts to buy their way out of its confines. This process of attempting redemption through consumerism results in the creation of a new sub-reality, based on the programs, which Debord describes as a “limitless artificiality,” in which constant accumulation of commodities replaces basic human desires, creating “a falsification of life” (45) that begins with the spectacle but then permeates reality in ways that start to make reality something that is spectacular in and of itself. As a society of the spectacle, to use Debord’s terminology, people become less able to distinguish the real from the spectacular, and reality television is a major catalyst in this melding.

When one reads Eve’s story as it is translated in most English language bibles, it seems quite clear that she is tricked into thinking she needs to eat the forbidden fruit. And while Genesis has God punishing the snake in a few ways, Eve still appears more at fault in the story because she buys into his trickery. She is conned into thinking that partaking in the fruit will bring her a knowledge of which she has been deprived; consequently, Eve becomes a woman infamous for the whole world’s unhappiness. Through buying into the idea that purchasing things will lead to an otherwise unattainable status of perfection, women set themselves up for a lifetime of disillusionment and disappointment. If viewers begin to accept realities that are constructed, manufactured, and sold, they lose the ability to transcend the hyperreal and gain a sense of who they are versus who the shows tell them they are supposed to be. As Douglas points out, though producers of this brand of

media may purport that these shows serve as a mirror of the culture, they are the type of mirrors that reflect distorted and unrealistic images of the female gender (18).

In the hyperreal world created within TRH, viewers can see women struggling as well as spending. But often, the latter is posed as remedy for the former. When a woman feels bad inside, she can simply make improvements on the outside. Plastic surgery has become an unfortunate addition to routine hygienic upkeep for those who can afford it. Whereas a haircut and a fresh application of make up could once suffice for a makeover, now there are needles and icepacks required. TRH has often featured Botox parties hosted by the cast members, one which featured a “Bo-tini” as the signature cocktail, complete with a syringe garnish (for squirting the beverage in one’s mouth). Most of the women have noticeable additions or alterations to their bodies and many freely admit it. Throughout each season of each installment of TRH, the plot will unfailingly address each of the women’s beauty secrets. Breast lifts/augmentations, facelifts, dermal fillers, and rhinoplasty are as common as hair spray and lipstick, often posed as rights of passage for the younger cast members and as inevitable maintenance for the slightly less young of the group. As Brenda Weber notes in her book *Makeover TV*, “the female made-over body thus indicates a postfeminist egalitarian utopia where sexual, racial, and ethnic differences between women subordinate to a primary identity as consumers” (129). Though not tackling the issues of race and ethnicity in this particular discussion, it is important to note the reductive quality of this makeover culture that renders all women passive purchasers. As Eve’s transgressions in the garden have created a myth of feminine imperfection, surgery and bodily alteration are not only posed as a solution to

this imperfection but also posited as a necessary endeavor for all women. Once again, Tertullian's double standard of femininity is illustrated through women's attempts to alter their cursed state through adornment, only to find that no amount of alteration will excuse them from being women.

In lieu of surgery, there are always outfits and jewels to lift the spirit, but the undeniable presence of bodily alteration as part and parcel of women's domestic obligations as wives and mothers is becoming disturbingly commonplace. There is no mistake that regardless of fulfilling the duties of mother, women must be careful to also retain the qualities that make them desirable to their husbands, lest they become virginal mothers by proxy. De Beauvoir writes, "Man succeeded in enslaving woman, but in doing so, he robbed her of what made possession desirable," (204) and this is true in that the Madonna/Whore or Mary/Eve complex remains a relevant myth. While playing the role of mother and wife, it is hard to retain the rebellious passion and sexuality associated with the other essential (mythical) female role. How do women cope with this double standard? How is this challenge handled by the real housewives? To quote Adrienne Maloof of *TRH of Beverly Hills*, "The higher the heel, the closer to God." While not a theme that most viewers likely notice when viewing these programs, the dichotomy of chaste mother versus sexual female is addressed by the ways in which these women in their 30s and 40s (and upwards) maintain a visual status as youthful, and therefore still sexual, through expensive and trendy designer clothing, conspicuous bodily alteration, and make-up and hair extensions applied by professionals. The visual signifiers of

motherhood on the shows are actually far more difficult to surmise; it would seem that the homes themselves, which receive most of the airtime, encompass the characters' essential realm, but there is very little that signifies them as mothers when they are not being filmed with their children. The plot points, again, revolve around either expenditures or drama-filled parties and trips. There is little direct address of the traditional responsibilities of motherhood or housewifedom as it was previously recognized within American culture. A show that did portray these traditional ideals would be problematic in its own set of ways, but the point to be drawn here is that when simulation of cultural representations occur, resulting in a hyperreal culture, the lack of recognition of this simulation leads to a confusion among all genders of what it means to be real, a housewife, and a mother, all at the level of success that is implied by these shows. There is a confusing message being transmitted, once more, that casts femininity as in need of a pattern to follow and a myth to embody so that it can function safely and correctly within society. The eternal feminine, while still centered on woman as body, has made a shift from the maternal function to the function of a sex object. While Eve's punishment took the form of pain in childbirth, TRH exemplify the burden of the eternal feminine as bodily alteration, though this is still performed, ultimately, as a service to men.

CHAPTER FIVE

BUYING INTO THE IMMEDIATE PANTOMIME

It is always difficult to describe myth; it does not lend itself to being grasped or defined; it haunts consciousnesses without ever being posited opposite them as a fixed object. The object fluctuates so much and is so contradictory that its unity is not at first discerned:

*Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena,
woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary.*

De Beauvoir 162

While the Bible has long been the source for anthropological information as well as mythological interpretation of the human state, the 21st century is certainly marked by its undivided attention to the media spectacle, and it is here where the modern person can most easily and effortlessly gain a sense of the world they are living in. However, while the media may be a relatively new phenomenon, especially in regard to its scope and reach, the spectacle has always been present in the development of social understanding. Much as the media subsumes ancient myths, so does the media now encapsulate all of the customary modes of spectacle. Everything from ancient theatre, sporting events, to political gatherings, is now part and parcel of what television is able to offer to a public eager for interaction with larger-than-life representations of their world. Debord writes on how cultures are shaped by their obsession with and reliance on the spectacle. It is “the very heart of society’s real unreality” and “epitomizes the prevailing model of social life” (Debord 13); in short, spectacle, like myth, is nothing less than necessary to a society’s understanding of itself. Television was in no way the dawn of revolution for spectacle, but it did serve to synthesize and streamline it, making even more ambiguous its

relationship to reality through the mesmerizing quality of its universal yet personalized distribution. Television is most often viewed privately in the home but is representative of the public world and posed metaphorically as a window to that world. So while television allows spectacle to be enjoyed in an isolated, reclusive environment, it still presents an illusion or causes a simulation of extroverted activity and social interaction.

While people want and need to see this time watching television, as “mindless entertainment,” it is clear from cultures’ reliance on myth and spectacle that a certain type of engagement with these fixtures is fundamental to how people form understanding. What becomes problematic is that the feeling of disengagement that supersedes the engagement with the spectacle precludes viewers from realizing the ways in which these interactions form personal belief. In this way, myth is a cornerstone of the hyperreal and of television culture. Despite the distinct division in the spectacle and the personal, the two become intersected.

What does this mean for members of a culture? Some may wonder wherein lies the problem of the overlapping of fantasy and mundane reality, whereas humans could not possibly mistake one for the other. In his book of essays, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes writes about different aspects of French culture that are essentially myths created out of human’s need to understand and to intermingle their personal fears with their fantastic desires. Barthes asserts that “what matters to the public is not what it believes but what it sees” (4), suggesting that it is not belief that often precludes an understanding

of culture but rather the culture writ large that in turn shapes the belief of its members. Regardless of indoctrination, whether familial, religious, or otherwise, people will look to what they see in their surroundings as example and ultimate indication of meaning. Spectacle is one of the ever-present forces in society that provides a platform for judgment and functions based on its audience's ability to see and evaluate what takes place. Truth is not the ultimate goal of spectacle, in fact it may be considered its antithesis, but what does play an important role is the ability of the viewers to form their own truths. Though their minds are suspended at the prospect of pure entertainment, the role of the viewers in recognizing and making some meaning, however inconsequential, of what they are seeing before them is the soul of the whole endeavor. It is the very appearance of the antithesis of truth as true that allows the spectacle to delight and impress. Barthes's essay, "The World of Wrestling" offers a theory of the "immediate pantomime," which proves useful in the discussion of how reality television prompts cultural mythmaking:

[Wrestling is]. . . "similar to ancient theatre: concurred in the exaggeratedly visible explanation of a Necessity. . . In wrestling, as on the stage in antiquity, one is not ashamed of one's suffering, one knows how to cry, one has a taste for tears. . . In either world what is expected is the intelligible figuration of moral situations ordinarily secret...Wrestling [like reality TV] is an immediate pantomime,

infinitely more effective than pantomime on stage, for the wrestler's gesture needs

no fabulation, no décor, in short no transference in order to appear true." Barthes

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The immediate pantomime represented on reality TV allows for audiences to receive that which they view as either real, scripted, or some indistinguishable hybrid of the two.

Whatever option the viewer assumes, the engagement with the spectacle results in the forming of a reaction and an opinion, regardless of its basis in fact or fiction.

Reality television is a bountiful breeding ground for both spectacle and myth; its function is to reveal usually restricted visions to the audience, allowing insight into a sort of imperial knowledge that can be gained only through a suspension of both logic and common sense to accept what appears as truth. Pozner points out how "viewers of all ages do ourselves a disservice by watching reality TV with our intellects on pause" (32).

However, the easier the truth appears and seems ripe for the plucking, the more tempting it is to taste it.

To spend too much time learning about others by seeing them as mindless entertainment is to risk using one source or one story to make conclusions about the whole on the basis of the miniscule fraction that is represented. To not use one's mind and to declare freely that one is not doing so is to admit that what is observed and thereby learned from the spectacle in question is not subject to critical thought or to mediated insight. So while television programs may be directly influencing the way an individual

views gender or other cultural or social concerns in the outside world, there can never be an acknowledgment of or presumption of personal accountability for this apparent influence. However, even the best intentions become lost in the wake of what can actually be used as a tangible, measurable results from these shows' cultural influence: sales.

CHAPTER SIX

SHE WAS TEMPTED... “THANKS TO THE VELVET, SILKS, AND CHINA”

Her home is thus her earthly lot, the expression of her social worth, and her intimate truth. Because she does nothing, she avidly seeks herself in what she has.

De Beauvoir 471

People call me a gold-digger, but they just want what I have.

Kim Zolciak, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*

Eve was tempted by the idea of knowledge, presented to her by a snake, which resulted in her punishment of being forever bound by her duty to laborious childbirth and to her husband. TRH, who constitute the same cultural figure in a reimagined context, are tempted (and tempt viewers) with ideas of perfection, or perhaps a search for alteration to the maternal body that enslaves them to the eternal feminine. However, like Eve, the housewives and their fans will find that the very act of trying to reach beyond their maternal bodies is what continues their relegation to them. When a real housewife is now constituted by wealth, her role of mother and wife becomes displaced (due to her ability to hire others to fulfill these duties for her), and she is left with the task of reconfiguring her body into some amalgam of mother and sexual object, but in either case, she remains valuable as a body. Furthermore, her attempts to succeed at being both Eve and Mary, both temptress and virgin, cause her to fail at both, as noted by Lee and Moscovitz (65). As the myth of the eternal feminine is perpetuated through the mass dissemination of this show, women who have left Eve and Mary in antiquity now look to their modern counterparts, the real housewives, as examples of femininity. Debord writes, “Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the

spectacle's banality into images of possible roles" (38), and *The Real Housewives* does nothing if not present female viewers with a homogenized, if slightly varied, portrayal of the ultimate female role. Whether holding these women up as a standard of domestic perfection and virginal motherhood (not likely) or hissing at them as a disgrace to the entire female and human population, viewers are shown exactly how femininity is shaped by wealth, power, and being a "real" "housewife."

In their article "The Housewives' Guide to Better Living," Nicole Cox and Jennifer Proffitt provide some evidence of the influence of what they call "feminist political economy" within TRH by providing an analysis of comments left by viewers on Bravo's website. While the subject of woman as consumer is frequently discussed, the issues most often taken with the show by viewers are the constant representations of conspicuous consumerism rather than the philosophies implied within those representations (308). In other words, the women who are choosing to comment on Bravo's website are those who are offended by the ridiculous range of the spending and not the representation of women's role as spender. The women who watch these shows are probably aware that the scope of the material items portrayed on the show are not necessarily within their financial reach. What is within women's reach however, might be the type of shoes the women on the shows are wearing or the handbags they carry. This is

where the cultural influence of these visual representations of wealth becomes apparent. Most notable in Proffitt and Cox's research is that those who took the time to comment on Bravo's website about TRH were unanimously interested in one thing: where they could buy the swag. Despite the complaints voiced on the website (mentioned above), women are still interested in participating in the actions that they simultaneously criticize. From dresses, to jewelry, to make-up, to flowers, women want to know where they can buy these symbols of successful femininity from the moment the items appear on the show. Despite previously discussed theories of simulation and cultural influence, this research provides indisputable proof that while women respond to these representations with a variety of emotions—anger, awe, indifference—they react most strongly and most notably with emulation. This is the trap that the myth of Eve and TRH creates: regardless of critical analysis of either narrative, gender is still defined by the terms put forth in the context of the myths.

This discussion does not seek to problematize the desire of some women to have nice homes and nice things. It is in placing this desire as essential to the eternal feminine, representing it as real in popular culture, and distorting the ideas of home and motherhood into a game of spending and accumulating that is problematic. The pattern that emerges from being tempted by these mindless ideas that are prompted by the ironic sexism within reality TV is detrimental to overcoming the eternal feminine. The luxury of mindlessness, sought after by so many Americans night after night, seems Edenic. In Genesis, it seems that God is very much in control of all that is happening, so it is

confusing how the snake, one of God's creatures, seems to throw off the whole balance of paradise in a matter of minutes. As Rooke, points out, "...both God and the (hu)man must take some responsibility for subsequent events, because one of them creates the snake and the other one determines its nature. In effect, they set each other up for a fall" (164). But, nonetheless, the sneaky snake seems to have tricked Eve and did so in a way that was not easily remedied and was damaging not only to one culture's view of woman, but to her view of herself. It is obvious to most that this story can simplify the resounding question of woman: she is unpredictable and can't be trusted, so she must be controlled.

But what of the snake? How does the snake's role in Eve's story play into this interpretation of femininity? Some might discount the snake due to his obviously inferior status as an animal, assuming that he merely served to bring out woman's dark nature that was already brewing below the soft surface. Perhaps that is the myth that these shows promote as well, but in a different context: the wealth is what brings out woman's natural tendency toward gluttonous spending and shameless reaching for self-improvement. A new reading might venture to reconfigure the Edenic snake as capitalism, seeing parallels in the temptations provided by indulgent solutions to woman's binding to nature and to her body, solutions that are no more than "repressed contradictions ... supposed at once

to deny and sustain” (Debord 41). While the snake offered Eve a solution for a problem that she did not even know that she had, conspicuous consumerism, as it is represented through lifestyle shows such as TRH, offers women an unending display of ways in which they could improve or make themselves better. However, this process is one that will inevitably continue to defeat women’s quest for perfection because, as Debord points out, the very nature of capitalism does not allow for perfection, despite promises that it can be purchased: “this continual process of replacement means that fake gratification cannot help but be exposed as products change, and as changes occur in the general conditions of production” (46). There is a never-ending cycle of desire, purchase, and defeat, resulting in new desires, new purchases, and new defeats. Because women are seen constantly buying into (literally and figuratively) the myth of the eternal feminine, because the results of their response can be marked, the temptations that women face become forgotten. Intention is lost and culture continues to be shaped by the visible results that survive: the spectacle of material wealth and its mythological framing as the basis of domestic success.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REVELATIONS

What is certain is that today it is very difficult for women to assume both their status of autonomous individual and their feminine destiny...

De Beauvoir 274

People try to figure me out, but I'm one of a kind.

Kim Richards, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*

It must not be ignored that according to the popular myth, Eve, woman, was the one who made the first subjective choice, free from and in opposition to the ultimate bearer of subjectivity, God himself. After this unforgettable transgression passes, Eve still goes on to inhabit the role of mother, which reinforces the essential nature of this role to femininity. For Mother should not be considered a derogatory title, so women should not be made to feel that its implications are such. The term “housewife,” however, perpetuates the problematic nature of relegating women’s role to her body or her objectified status as a wife in the house. For as women and men of all ages can learn from less than an hour spent on the Bravo network, real housewives are always first and foremost of value in their role as guardian of the home and representing that home through bodily displays of material wealth. And the show never ceases to offer what viewers can receive as a sampling of what it looks like to reach the ideal, to be the *real* housewife of the Edenic city to which you aspire to move. This program prompts interactions between the viewer and the spectacle, however seemingly inconsequential, that urges recognition of women who appear successful as housewives due to their ability to buy the unattainable

perfection of the maternal body and its realm, the home. However, it is important that viewers acknowledge that the perfection suggested by the show is not only spectacle in the context of TRH but also in the context of realistic notions of femininity.

Much like postbiblical scholarship came to shape popular notions both of Eve and femininity at large, TRH can be read as yet another postbiblical text that presents Eve yet again in a modern interpretation of the eternal feminine. Though TRH exist within the realm of spectacle, because the subjects are, in fact, real people and because viewers simulate what is presented on the shows, a very tangible reality is created in which women are still striving to simultaneously reach for knowledge beyond their function as maternal bodies while also perpetuating their unbreakable bond to them through subscribing to the serpent that is capitalism. As the first woman was scorned for her reach, “the populist scorn that the show provokes is not gender neutral; its sights are set on the rich, to be sure, but only rich women, especially those who transgress the traditional gender roles of supportive friend, nurturing mother, doting wife, and ceaseless caretaker” (Lee and Moscovitz 65). The myth of the eternal feminine, begun in Judeo-Christian culture by Eve, continues now within the realm of reality television.

The Real Housewives, despite the criticism it receives in this discussion, should not be condemned for what it is. The shows’ entertainment value is indisputable, and its creators have hit a goldmine of spectacle with each cast. However, much like Christians who are criticized for following too ignorantly in their faith, followers of the Church of Reality Television must also remain at a safe distance from their texts in order to maintain a more complete perspective of how and why the associated antiquated

mythologies must be kept from reproducing themselves infinitely and without proper reconsideration. There must be an understanding of the effects of receiving spectacle as reality and of allowing members of a culture to participate in entertainment that is scrutinizing yet simultaneously selling ideas of perfected femininity. There should also be recognition of the ways in which the capitalistic tone of these shows, with their shameless and endless representations of conspicuous consumerism, is selling more than just an ideal. These shows sell a lifestyle that is based on purchasing as a means to overcome a stereotype of flawed femininity that has been passed down from Eve and still resides within popular media such as *The Real Housewives*.

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